

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Measles

What is measles?

Measles is a disease caused by a virus, has a sudden onset and is capable of causing major epidemics.

Who gets measles?

Although measles is usually considered a childhood disease, it can be contracted at any age. Large outbreaks have been recently occurring in the high school and college aged groups. Generally, preschool children, adolescents, young adults and those who refuse vaccination comprise the majority of measles cases in the United States.

How is measles spread?

Measles is spread to others by droplet spread (sneezing or coughing) and by direct contact with nasal or throat secretions of a person with measles. Once the measles virus gets into the air in a room or building, it can remain there for two or more hours and infect others that may enter the exposed area. Measles is one of the diseases that can quickly pass from one person to another that is not protected against it.

What are the symptoms of measles?

Measles symptoms start about one week after being exposed to the disease. The person may at first have cold symptoms which include: cough, runny nose, red eyes, and/or a slight fever. The fever will rise to 101(F) or higher. Within three days of the start of the early symptoms, a red blotchy rash will break out. The rash usually will start on the neck or face, spread over the body and last 4-7 days. The person with measles will usually feel very sick with the most severe illness in infants and adults.

When and for how long is a person able to spread measles?

An individual is able to transmit measles from seven days prior to and four days after the start of the rash. People with measles are often infectious before the cold symptoms start.

What are the complications of measles?

Measles causes ear infections and/or pneumonia in one out of ten cases. It may cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), which leads to convulsions, deafness, or mental retardation. Measles can cause death. Both short and long-term adverse effects on infant and child mortality (death rates) have been documented.

What is the treatment for measles?

There is no specific treatment for measles.

How can measles be prevented?

The single most effective control measure is being immunized properly against measles and maintaining the highest possible immunization levels in the community. Other methods of control included: 1) a very active community surveillance program to identify the occurrence of the disease, 2) identifying persons who may have been or will be exposed to the disease to ensure that they are properly immunized, and 3) to remove susceptible (unprotected) persons from settings where measles may occur.

How can I be certain I am protected against measles?

Persons unsure of their immune status should consult their health care provider to determine necessary measles immunizations. All persons should have an immunization record card that documents that they have received vaccination against measles, if needed. To receive an immunization card, contact your health care provider.

Does past infection make a person immune?

Yes. Permanent immunity is acquired after contracting the disease.

Is there a vaccine for measles?

Yes. All persons born after January 1, 1957 should receive two doses of measles mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine. Children should receive the first dose at 12-15 months of age and the second dose before school entry.